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Why Some Georgians Still Love Stalin

By Paul Rimple

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Dec. 18 is a sanctified day at the Josef Stalin museum in Gori. Every year, a diehard group of pensioners bear the freezing weather to commemorate the birthday of Iosif Dzhugashvili in front of the little wooden house he was born in.

Stalin's grandson, Yevgeny, did not make the event this year, but local Communist leaders brandishing red flags, banners, flowers and a portrait addressed some 100 devotees through a megaphone.

"We Georgians are proud of Stalin. When he was in charge, the Soviet Union was at its height of power," an octogenarian told a group of peers and observant high school kids, who were on a class tour of the museum.

It's an aphorism the stalwarts never tire of hearing or repeating. They take it and spin tall tales of a folk hero who single-handedly kept the entire world in order. Standing in the cold, in tattered clothes, the old-timers tell you how they lived like kings when Stalin was in power.

Their selective memories have no room for Stalin's 20 million victims. Ask them about the people he executed, and they'll remind you that he never did it personally or that it was necessary for the security of the nation. Press them about the innocent women and children he also had killed and they will get offended. For these people, the Communist era was the most stable period in their lives. Twenty years after its fall, they have next to nothing. The world has passed them up.

The Georgian government has embraced a radical capitalistic economic policy and has essentially declared war on the country's Communist past. They established the Museum of Soviet Occupation in 2006, destroyed the main World War II Soviet victory monument in Kutaisi in 2009 and passed the Freedom Charter last May, which is a package of laws that aims, among other things, to erase Georgia's visible ties to its Soviet past. Late one night in June, officials quietly removed the famous 15-meter Stalin monument from the front of Gori City Hall.

While Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's negative stance toward Georgia's Communist legacy is clear, the local Stalinist's view of Saakashvili can be ambiguous. One man, holding a portrait of Stalin, told journalists that Saakashvili has learned Stalin's lessons well, which indicates that the love of Stalin isn't as much about ideologies as it is about the image of power and character.

But Yevgeny, Stalin's grandson, is an ideologue. In an interview in 2001, he said former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, were masked enemies of communism. If Stalin were alive today, Yevgeny asserts, they would be the first ones taken to the wall and shot.

"Stalin was a patriot, but that word has no meaning now," he said, sitting under portraits of Stalin and Yevgeny's father, Yakov, who Stalin let die in a German concentration camp. Like the old men in Gori, Yevgeny also lives with his own rendition of Stalin.

Stalin didn't just have millions of people killed, he eliminated the concepts of social responsibility and individualism. You can't bury the shackles of his legacy by simply erasing symbols. Until democratic institutions are built where people look upon their leaders as elected public servants, they will continue to pay homage to a fable each year.

"Stalin, a killer?" a ninth-grade Georgian boy said. "No, he was a great man."

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